

A measure of security for some of Montgomery County's lowest-paid workers

By Valerie Ervin and Phil Mendelson, Published: August 31

Metropolitan Washington is among the most vibrant and successful regions in the nation. On Labor Day, we honor all the men and women who help make it so.

One group of workers, however, deserves a special salute: those who often get taken for granted — janitors, food service workers, nurse's aides, security guards and others who work hard at tough jobs in a low-wage world.

Even a temporary income disruption for these service workers can result in hunger and homelessness. That's why, despite representing opposite sides of the Montgomery County-Washington boundary, we join together here to draw attention to a modest but important step that local governments can take to help protect these workers against sudden layoffs.

The [Displaced Service Workers bill](#), now before the Montgomery County Council, would ensure that experienced employees in the county are not arbitrarily replaced when a service contract changes hands. A similar law has long been in place in the District.

Montgomery's law would provide a degree of financial security to workers who often survive paycheck to paycheck — without unduly burdening the business community — by requiring a new contractor to offer temporary employment to incumbent employees for the first 90 days of the new contract. The bill would not regulate compensation.

The District's law, which has been in place for 18 years, has provided this stability for service workers while creating no noticeable financial difficulties for businesses. Similar laws are in place in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Providence, R.I.; and New York, also with no apparent adverse impact. In fact, these cities have enjoyed some of the strongest-performing office markets for a considerable length of time. Contractors in the District report that the law enables them to compete fairly on the quality of their services without hurting employees, a hallmark practice of any responsible contractor.

Service workers and their families are among those who do not share in the overall economic strength of our region. Already, in Montgomery County, 57,000 people are enrolled in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly the food stamp program), up 125 percent in the past four years. Nearly a third of public-school students are eligible for free or reduced-price meals. Almost 120,000 people do not have health insurance. When low-income workers lose their jobs without warning, they often must turn to these programs for help, increasing the costs to government.

The Displaced Service Workers bill is about fundamental fairness for some of our region's lowest-paid employees. During this time of unprecedented fiscal stress, the bill simply represents what the District and other cities have already shown: There is a modest and workable way to make their lives more secure.

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